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Review of David Wishart, *The Last Days of the Rainbelt*

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The Last Days of the Rainbelt.

By David J. Wishart.

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013. 224 pp.

Illustrations, maps, graphs, notes, bibliography, and index.

Cloth \$29.95.

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Five decades before the Dust Bowl ravaged southwestern Nebraska, western Kansas, and eastern Colorado, the High Plains experienced a similar pattern of settlement boom and drought bust. David Wishart, a preeminent Great Plains scholar, provides a compelling expose´ of how apocryphal precipitation fantasies (such as “rain follows the plow”) in the mid-1880s lured tens of thousands of poor migrants to a region that then had the ironic nickname of the Rainbelt. One look at the photo of a forlorn abandoned schoolhouse on the cover of this slender monograph makes it clear that this is a tragedy of how settlers were lured into a promised land but met a place where their dreams “blew away like tumbleweeds” (p. xiii).

A brief introduction sets the context for the Rainbelters (dryland farmers) within American exceptionalism, Turner’s frontier thesis, and pioneer boosterism. Chapter 1, “The Approach from the East, 1854– 1885,” features an insightful summary of the arrhythmia of frontier settlement geography. This chapter also belies Walter Prescott Webb’s assertion that frontier settlement on the High Plains stalled because settlers lacked the tools or knowledge to thrive; Wishart cites precipitation vagaries and economic turmoil as more influential. The next two chapters, “Into the Rainbelt, 1886–1890” and “Life in the Rainbelt, circa 1890,” extensively draw on WPA-era interviews of elderly eastern Coloradans about their frontier settlement memories. These engaging voices, combined with contemporary observations by newspaper journalists, railroad boosters, state agricultural agents, and land speculators, are the meat of the book and its distinctive contribution to the historical geography of the plains. Any history of the plains is fundamentally also an environmental history, and Wishart notes how the locusts and searing winds, for example, wreaked havoc with the procurement of water, shelter, and subsistence.

Chapter 4, "The Last Days of the Rainbelt, 1890-1896," recounts how a series of dry years was ultimately far more powerful than the occasional wet year in convincing settlers of the Rainbelt reality: starving families on failed farms. Outlandish rainmaking schemes clouded this reality far more than the sky, and federal policies to aid farmers crushed with indebtedness were nearly nonexistent at the time. The perceptive epilogue, "After the Rainbelt," discusses how much has changed in recent years on the High Plains in terms of federal payments, use of the Ogallala Aquifer for irrigated agriculture, and frequent corporate or absentee ownership of large-acreage wheat farms. Yet invasive species, weather extremes, and declining water tables continue to make occupancy of the High Plains a "tenuous endeavor" (p. 162).

The vintage photographs and the precipitation and population charts and maps add a great deal to chapters 2 through 4. Unfortunately, the small format of the book means the place names on these maps are minuscule. More photographs in the first forty pages would be welcome, but the primary omission early in the book is a comprehensive map to show major towns, waterways, counties, and railroads. Unfortunately, the precipitation maps cover a smaller cluster of counties than the text routinely addresses, but commendably, the book is almost error free, with only a few inconsistencies in the spelling of WaKeeney, Kansas.

Wishart's command of the topic and crisp writing style offer great value to any reader interested in the plains frontier. The scholarly tone will likely challenge undergraduate students, but the book is well suited to the graduate level. *The Last Days of the Rainbelt* offers countless insights into frontier settlement. One example is that it was rarely the intent of those filing a Timber Culture Act claim to prove up; the goal was to get a loan on the claim and move on. Another example is that it was not only the scarcity of wood that made sod houses more common in western than eastern Kansas; different root structures of grasses and new plow technology were key reasons. Wishart has admirably succeeded in bringing to life a forgotten yet fascinating era.